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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 000715

SIPDIS

NSC FOR AFRICA DIRECTOR JENDAYI FRAZER
CAIRO FOR POL - J. MAXSTADT

DECL: 4/17/2008

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [MASS](#) [NI](#)

SUBJECT: NOT A GOOD TIME TO BE THE AMERICAN AMBASSADOR
IN NIGERIA

Classified by Ambassador Howard F. Jeter for reason
1.5 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: The United States-Nigeria bilateral relationship recently has experienced more friction than has been noted for months. A confluence of foreign policy differences, bilateral concerns, and Nigeria's domestic politics produced this strain. Disagreement over Iraq and our suspension of military assistance clearly contributed to the dissonance. However, the agent that really ionized the atmosphere has been the edginess and cynical political considerations influencing the GON psychology during this pressurized election period. In short, some of the President's advisors decided that wise diplomacy did not make for good politics. Gauging U.S. unpopularity due to Iraq, they saw that some publicized U.S.-bashing might sway a few votes and perhaps even distract some citizens from their unhappiness with the GON's poor performance on key issues. Thus, they decided, in an effort to appear "even-handed," to bait the electorate by linking our military suspension to GON opposition to the war on Iraq. End Summary.

12. (C) The tripartite letter Obasanjo signed with Presidents Wade and Mbeki was an ineffectual effort that should have expired in the world of thought before it entered the realm of action. Nevertheless, the GON did not vociferously oppose our stance on Iraq, not prior to the actual intervention and even less now. Its opposition was consistently moderate in both tone and substance. While we had hoped Nigeria would have been more supportive, its position was not so extreme as to portend the media fall-out that ensued.

13. (C) However, for the GON, bad diplomacy equalled good domestic politics. Given widespread opposition in Nigeria to the war in Iraq, strategists within the Administration figured electoral mileage could be had by stating that our military assistance suspension was in response to the GON stance on Iraq. By casting this willful misrepresentation, they hoped to stir the prickly nationalism of elites, Northerners and Southerners alike, all too aware of the centrifugal forces that affect their country. Doing so would lay to rest accusations that Obasanjo was so intent on doing America's bidding that he had become "Yoruba First, the United States Second, and Nigeria Third." Publicly slapping the U.S. would, these strategists hoped, counter the President's pro-American reputation, helping him particularly in the North, where his support is the weakest and the risk of not reaching the 25% threshold therefore highest.

14. (C) Moreover, but less importantly, Obasanjo strategists felt this tack also would shift attention away from the true reason for our assistance suspension. After having said that the suspension was due to Washington's anger over Nigeria's policy on Iraq, it would be difficult and nigh unpatriotic for any opposition politician to correct the record by pointing to the unresolved questions surrounding Benue massacre. If so, that politician ran the risk as being labeled the new American lackey. Creating this fake linkage with Iraq helped minimize the impact of our military assistance suspension as a campaign issue and muted people from raising the Benue massacre as an issue as well. The GON's chief flack, Information Minister Jerry Gana went a step beyond the original words of the never-helpful Minister of State for Foreign Affairs (Dubem Onyia), lashing out at the U.S. during a regular weekly media brief for presuming to know Nigeria's national interests better than its own leaders.

15. (C) In a recent discussion, Presidential Special Advisor on International Affairs Ad'Obe Obe told Ambassador Jeter "it was not a good time to be the American Ambassador in Nigeria." Among the Nigerian political class, it was more popular to criticize America right now and that reality had crept into the electoral calculations of the President's team. Obe admitted that veracity had become an easy casualty of these electoral calculations. Obe claimed the President had ordered a correction of the unfortunate statements Onyia had used to precipitate this entire episode. However, the "clarification" issued by Gana merely compounded Onyia's sophistry. Obe said he confronted Gana, who replied that the Onyia statement was playing too well politically to be retracted. COMMENT: In a spontaneous and undoubtedly somewhat exaggerated remark to a Mission spouse at about this time, Obe's wife exclaimed, "My whole country hates America now, but I still love you!" END COMMENT.

16. (C) The Ambassador stressed to Obe that continued public mis-statement of the U.S. position might play well within this circle of advisors but it had begun to irritate Washington. It projected a negative and false image of the United States in Nigeria and throughout Africa. This disservice could not simply be cast aside to political exigency. The Ambassador urged the GON to honor its promise to correct the record; at the very least, the GON should cease and desist from further negative comment on this issue. He reminded Obe that if we were forced to clarify the record, a USG statement would automatically focus attention on the true cause of the assistance suspension, the 2001 Benue massacre, presumably not an issue that the GON would want to revive on the eve of National Elections. Obe reiterated that a correction would be too politically costly to contemplate but he also understood that continued misrepresentation would be costly as well. He said he would convey our message.

17. (C) Comment: Since the Ambassador's conversation with Obe, GON statements on the military suspension have ended. Our message to Obe might have been persuasive; but the cessation also likely reflects the fact that the tale had lived out its immediate utility. Also, senior GON officials had become far too engrossed with the demands of campaigning in their local government areas where this fiction and the friction arising from it were far less useful tools.

18. (C) In any event, the clear U.S. victory in Iraq and GON preoccupation with the elections have begun to lessen the tension in the bilateral discourse. However, the bilateral tension will spike again, perhaps even higher, if our assessment of the elections is critical. In an effort to impugn our conclusion, Gana and Onyia would not be above claiming that Nigeria's "stand against U.S. imperialism" (or words to that effect) influenced our analysis. JETER